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GOLDTHWAITE
CITY LIMIT
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LOOKING FOR A SIMPLER
PLACE AND TIME

SCENE SPECIAL—Brides' Book

LOOKING FOR A SIMPLER PLACE AND TIME

Life in a small town
like Goldthwaite again looks
good to many jaundiced
metropolitan dwellers

By **CARLTON STOWERS**

*On their way home from high school, students
Sally Saylor and Larry Elliott pass
a modern sign that bids a religious welcome to visitors.*



Place your finger on the center of a map of Texas and you will cover Goldthwaite, the Mills County seat. It is a quiet, casual-paced community of 1,693 people which is currently in a "boom" that it finds hard to understand.

Born in 1885 as a whistle stop on the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad, Goldthwaite unexpectedly is experiencing a steady population increase; business houses are prospering and expanding, and in the past two years bank deposits increased by an amazing 30 per cent. In the past, the pattern was for youngsters to go away to college and thereafter return only for Christmas trips home with the grandkids. But nowadays, after college many are returning to native soil to begin careers and raise their families.

"We're the same little ole town except for a few new buildings and homes. But all of a

sudden we're attractive to the young people who a few years back were complaining there was nothing to do around here," says Roger Horton, chief of Goldthwaite's volunteer fire department and owner of the Wagon Wheel Cafe.

Ironically, many of the benefits which are luring young sons and daughters back to places like Goldthwaite are, in a manner of speaking, negative. They are returning for things the community does not offer—so that they will no longer have to breathe polluted air, shield their children from involvement with dope and battle traffic on freeways. Here, where there is not even a local police department (law and order is entrusted to a county sheriff), it does not take a \$20,000 annual salary just to make ends meet.

There is, in fact, a nationwide population trend which suggests that the Goldthwaites

throughout the state and nation are no longer being viewed as dried up, dying towns but rather as the Camelots that many metropolitan dwellers are searching for.

For the first time since World War II, there are signs that the movement of rural population into urban centers is reversing. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's population study group estimates that between 1970 and 1972 the net movement from metropolitan to non-metropolitan areas ranged between 300,000 and 500,000 people. And since 1970, employment has been rising faster in non-metropolitan counties than in metropolitan ones.

"You'll have to go back to the pre-1890 period, when the corn belt and the Great Plains were being actively settled, to find anything like it," says Calvin L. Beale of Washington, D.C., who heads the population study group. The new migration is not so much a



In Mrs. Verona House's third grade class at the Goldthwaite elementary school, enrollment is growing and patriotism flourishes.



Problems of urban centers seem far removed from the back room of Goldthwaite's pool hall, where domino games go on almost endlessly.

back-to-the-farm as a back-to-the-country movement, with families enjoying modern conveniences, good roads and smallscale urban facilities near their homes. "This is a major historic turning point," Beale adds.

A recent Gallup poll of city dwellers revealed that one of every five persons interviewed was unhappy with life in the city. In urban centers of one million or more population, one in three interviewees said they wanted to get out. And a National Opinion Research Center poll last year showed half the persons interviewed in cities of 50,000 or more wanted to move to smaller towns or to the countryside.

Many of the lures of small towns like Goldthwaite are obvious—friendly faces, clean air, a slower pace, lower rent. Yet there are other advantages best defined as a state of mind. For many people there is a nostalgic

fascination for Rural America; it is a frontier one can still retreat to and recapture, to a degree, the wonderful days of yesteryear. Tiny, hospitable Goldthwaite fulfills these visions with room to spare. Despite its new hotel, the modern new Chevrolet and Ford buildings, the remodeling of Hudson's Drug and the face-lifting of several other businesses on the town square, Goldthwaite is still very much a reminder of a simpler place and time.

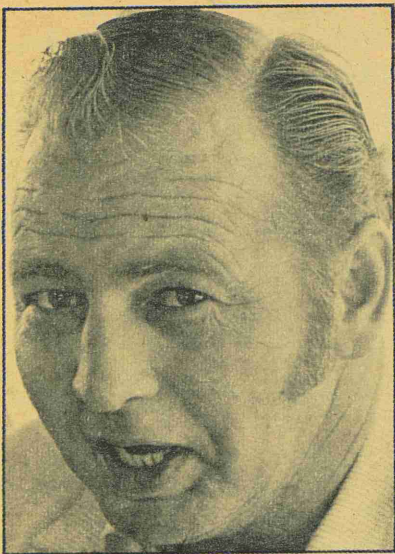
You need only to watch W. P. Woody as he stokes a wood-burning stove in his drugstore, or sit in on sunrise coffee conversations at the Wagon Wheel, or spend a noon hour visiting in the pool hall-domino parlor to realize that the Dallases and Houstons are miles and years away from here.

As recently as five years ago Warren Duren, president of the Mills County State Bank, was pessimistic about the future of

Goldthwaite. Like many other Central and West Texas communities dependent on agriculture, the town was hard hit by the infamous drouth of the '50s, was robbed of fertile farmland and a number of families who fled in search of a place with more economic promise. Duren and others had strong doubts that Goldthwaite would come back. They seemed resigned to Goldthwaite becoming largely a community of elderly people growing older and dying, taking the town to the grave with them. (Even today Mills County has the highest percentage of residents over 65 of any Texas county, and deaths still run considerably ahead of births.)

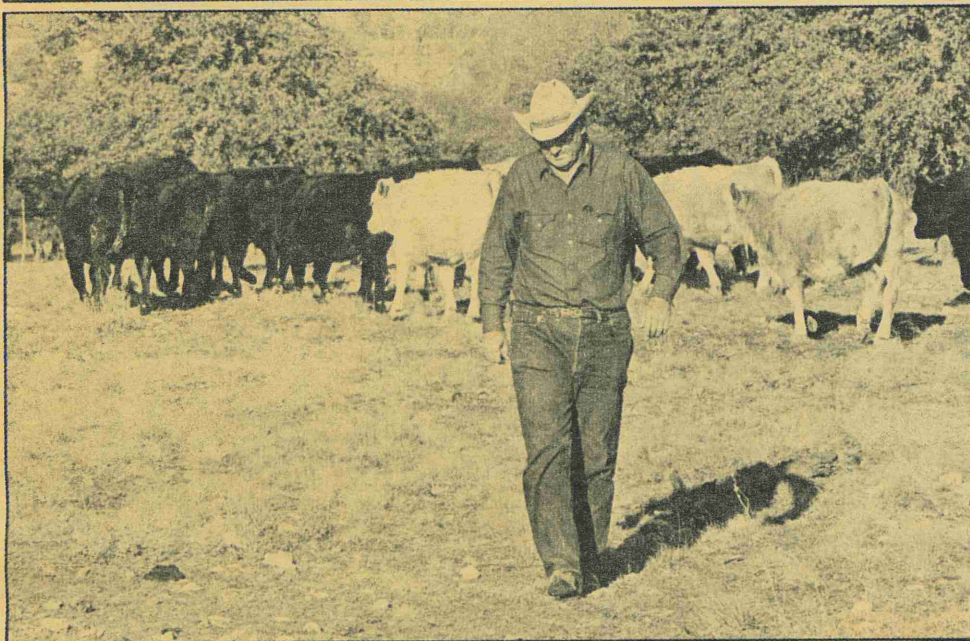
Recalling the town's less prosperous days, Duren sits at his bank desk looking out a window. "I can remember standing out there on the sidewalk not too many years ago with a fella who told me, 'Warren, what this town

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Typical of people who are migrating to small communities, Johnny Britton moved with his family to Goldthwaite not long ago because the drug problem in his former home, a large Texas city, was "getting impossible."

W. P. Woody regularly begins his workday by building a fire in the wood-burning stove at his place of business, Woody's Drug Store.



For long-time cattlemen like R. M. Robertson, the satisfaction of tending a herd could never be replaced by fast-paced living in a big city.



needs is a good tornado to put it out of its misery."

"I was about ready to agree with him. All the young people seemed to be leaving, taking with them the creativity and drive and enthusiasm a town needs not only to prosper, but to survive."

In recent years, Duren's attitude has done a complete about-face. "The young people—those who grew up here as well as many who spent their lives in larger cities—have come to realize we have something to offer that the big cities don't. Here they find a wholesome atmosphere in which to raise their children, opportunities for young businessmen, and a chance to become an active part of the community—to know their neighbors and be called by their first name when they walk down the street."

The bank where Duren has worked for 27 years now lists assets over \$20 million, a reflection of the town's new progress.

"We've got our share of welfare cases," Duren notes, "but generally speaking the eco-

nomic situations of families here are pretty good. There aren't many big salaries, but in a lot of cases the husband and wife both work and their combined incomes amount to something like \$12,000 per year. A family can live quite comfortably here for that."

While the farming of the '50s has given way to sheep, goat and cattle ranching, it is seldom the prospect of becoming full-time ranchers that beckons new residents to Goldthwaite. Don Petty, the 30-year-old city manager who moved his family from Waco two years ago, says many newcomers are buying small places in the country for \$225 to as high as \$500 an acre and running some livestock on the acreage. "But these days," he adds, "it is hard, almost impossible, to make a living (with the small amount of cattle that can be run) on a couple of hundred acres; so they use

their ranching activity to supplement their income and to keep meat in their freezers. They're more what I would call evening and weekend ranchers, holding down full-time jobs in town during the week."

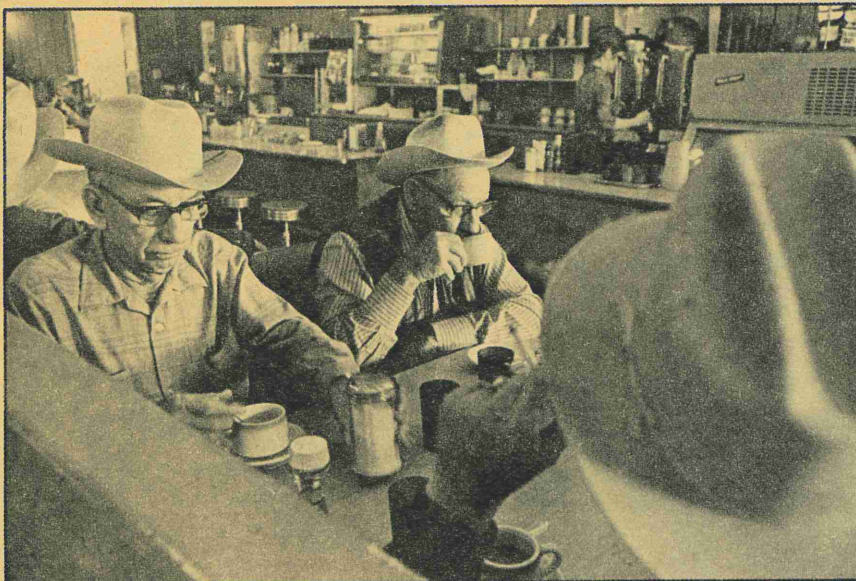
One of the part-time ranchers is Wendell Tucker, 32, who brought his family from San Angelo three years ago and purchased one of the town's two lumberyards. He is also a building contractor and keeps so busy with building jobs that he has little spare time to tend the stock on his small place nine miles outside town.

"It seems the more houses we build the worse the housing shortage gets," Tucker says. "I expect the town would be growing even faster if there was more housing available. Instead, we've got people just waiting for us to get their house built so they can move in."

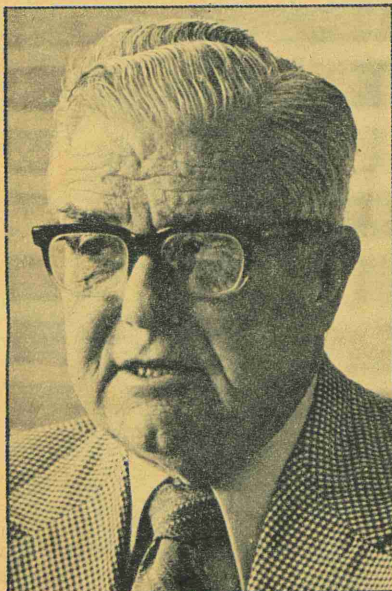
In the past two years, Tucker has built 15 new houses (another dozen have been built by other contractors), all now occupied, and he has several others in the planning stage. Without exception, his new homes were sold

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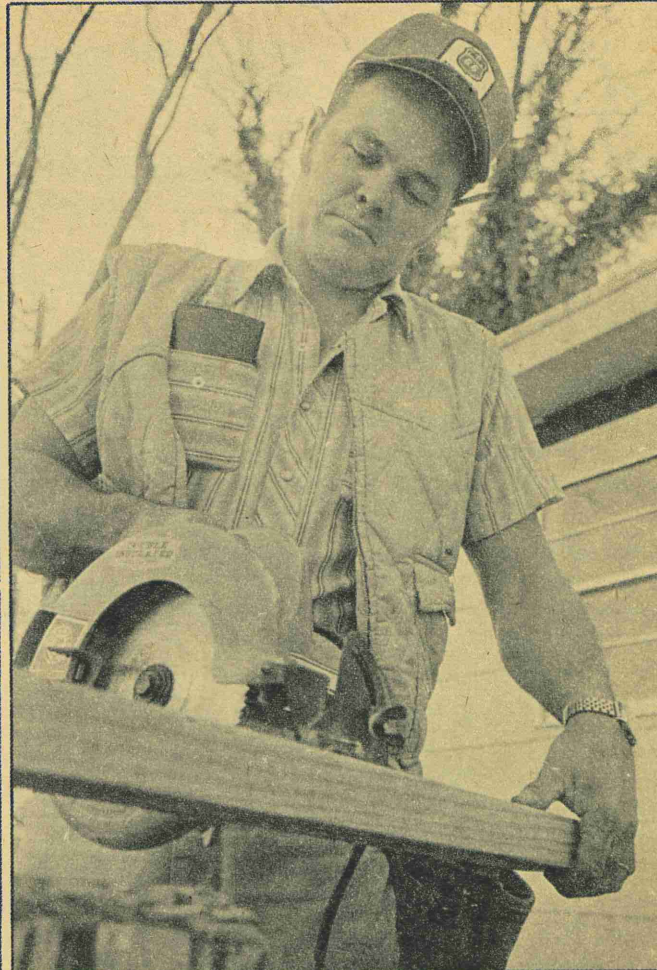
Coffee conversation at the Wagon Wheel Cafe is more likely to be about quail hunting than about Watergate or the energy crisis.



Wendell Tucker, lumberyard owner and building contractor, moved his family from San Angelo to Goldthwaite and immediately began building homes for others who would be moving to the little Central Texas community.



Banker Warren Duren says young people are beginning to realize the advantages that small towns offer: A good place to raise families, job opportunities and a chance to know their neighbors.



before he finished them. Tucker also has recently completed an expansion of the funeral home, remodeled numerous residences, built several small office buildings and two church additions.

"In a town this size, there is great opportunity for a young man who wants to get into his own business," Tucker says. "I was faced with the decision of working in somebody else's lumberyard all my life, or coming here and trying to make a go of it on my own. I haven't regretted my decision."

Nor has his wife Wilora, mother of the couple's three younger sons. "I can't imagine a better place to raise children," she says. "Ours know every child their age in town and get far more personal attention in school here than they ever did in the larger towns we lived in."

Gilbert Davis, superintendent of schools, is quick to echo Mrs. Tucker's evaluation and points proudly to the elementary school's steady increase in enrollment, particularly in the first, second and third grades.

Frank Bridges, 30, began his newspaper career in Galveston and Austin before recently becoming owner and editor of *The Goldthwaite Eagle*, the weekly newspaper which keeps townspeople informed about such things as the high school football team's triumphs, who had weekend visitors in their homes and the goings-on at city council meetings. He is, in the tradition of country journalism, a man whose sworn duty is to keep up with everything that happens in his circulation area.

Asked to describe a typical Goldthwaite resident, Bridges reflects a moment then says, "In a manner of speaking, he is an isolationist, preferring to be out of the mainstream. He's aware of Watergate and the energy crisis, but

over coffee he's more likely to talk about how many quail he shot yesterday or how much trouble one of his cows had calving the other night. He's easygoing, a Democrat, wears jeans or khaki pants, buys a couple of new hats a year, drinks a lot of coffee, maintains a personal relationship with his neighbor and, though he may not have attended college, is a smart man."

That latter trait, Bridges adds with a grin, is why the fellow lives in Goldthwaite instead of in a large city.

"This is the kind of place I was looking for to raise my family," the newspaperman says, "and quite frankly I feel more comfortable here than I ever would have in a large town."

"We've got a lot of plus factors, and then some minuses. There's really not much for the young people to do around here except go to the Dairy Cup after school and the Teen Union Building on weekends. There's no movie or bowling alley or anything of that nature. We need something better for them."

"And, too, the housewife doesn't have the large discount houses she can shop at and save a dollar here and there. Without doubt, there are luxuries and advantages found in big cities that a town this size simply cannot support."

Recreation for Goldthwaite's youth consists chiefly of school and church activities. And older people with a yen for nightlife find the pickings slim as well.

"Here," says Bridges, "you still find a lot of couples going over to another couple's house on Saturday night just to visit and drink coffee or play dominoes. This is the kind of personal relationship which has gone by the

wayside in the hurry-up, party-time atmosphere of a city. You don't get a baby sitter here, you take your kids with you and let them play with the other people's kids while you visit."

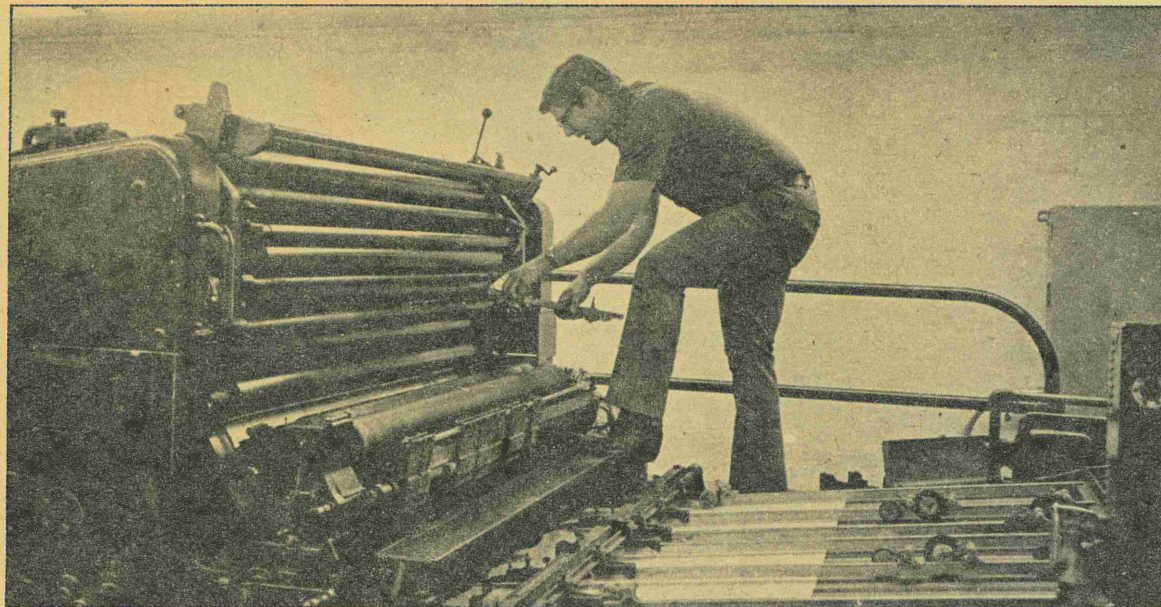
The Rev. Gordon Talk, 33, moved to the Goldthwaite United Methodist Church last year after attending a Dallas seminary and serving as a pastor in Baton Rouge, La., his hometown. Goldthwaite is a stable community, he says, noting that in numerous families as many as three generations are still living in the town. "People here aren't always moving to the next town or the next job. They are more interested in getting to know each other and enjoying life than in chasing the 'big buck'."

Citing a sharp attendance increase at young adult Sunday classes at his and other Goldthwaite churches, the Rev. Mr. Talk adds, "Even the younger people in a community like this seem to have their life-styles charted and are comfortable with the good old protestant ethic which is absent in so many places today."

"When we were living in Dallas, my wife simply wouldn't go out alone after dark. Here, she feels comfortable going all over the county by herself. And if my kid wants to ride a bicycle across town it's not something I worry about."

"On the other hand, I think it's unfair to assume that all young people moving in here have just come to escape the urban rat race."

A number of young men have come back from college to work alongside their fathers in Goldthwaite and, no doubt, eventually take over the family businesses. The Rev. Mr. Talk



Newspaper owner Frank Bridges finds the pace and life-style of Goldthwaite to his liking.

mentions University of Texas graduate Owen Yarbrough who returned to help his father run the dry goods store, and Dr. Tom Cody Graves who has gone to work in his father's dental office. Warren Duren's son Tom and Tom's high school pal Clyde Cockrum Jr. are back home practicing law, and Gene Aldredge and Danny Spradling, a pair of Goldthwaite High graduates, are coaching the football team on which they both played. Cecil Campbell, recently out of Texas Tech, is working in the Stacy Insurance Agency, and Andy Cook has gone into the well-drilling business with his father.

"There were some opportunities to go to work in larger cities," says Campbell, the



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young insurance man. "I gave it considerable thought. Then I was offered this job at home, and it occurred to me that I would be at an advantage working in a place where I knew everyone and where I felt I could be happy. A lot of my college friends simply can't understand why I would want to work here instead of in Dallas or Fort Worth, and there's no way I can really explain it to them. I think maybe it takes a particular breed of person to be able to enjoy living in a small town. I happen to be of that breed, I guess."

But to be sure, there are many among the new city taxpayers who admit they came to escape some of the large-city problems. Johnny Britton, a plumber who moved from Amarillo six months ago, has three children and is quite candid about why he came to Goldthwaite. "Simple," he says, while repairing a troublesome faucet, "the drug situation in Amarillo was getting impossible. It was even in the elementary schools. I only regret that I waited so long to get the hell out of there."

"I was making good money in Amarillo," he adds, "but it was too high a price to pay, seeing one of your own children getting mixed up with the wrong crowd. I began asking around and a friend told me about Goldthwaite and said there was no full-time plumber in the town. I came down, checked around and made the move."

Britton's services are welcomed by the community and he has more business than he can handle in a normal workday.

"No way they're going to get me out of here," he says, "unless they run me out. People care about other people here. They're friendly and anxious to make you feel welcome. We're happy here; really happy for the first time in a long, long time."

In Goldthwaite they don't refer to the arrivals of the Brittons and Tuckers and Bridges as part of any "boom." Rather they look on the relocations as a satisfying sign of progress, pumping new life into the town.

As expected, there are some older members of the community who fear that their little town is going to "fool around and get too big for its britches," but they are few.

Most of Goldthwaite's people are excited over the things they see happening. News that a Dallas-based marble firm has shown interest in relocating in Goldthwaite has caused considerable conversation. When Frank Bridges reported that a fiberglass boat manufacturer in Gatesville was considering purchase of land in Goldthwaite to build a new headquarters, there were many approving nods.

Says City Manager Petty, "Many businesses with small work forces are looking for small towns to move to. They're looking for places like Goldthwaite for the same reasons individuals are."

"It's satisfying, knowing people are looking at your home with admiration. And, naturally, those of us who live here think we have a better way of life to offer."

Obviously, a number of people share that opinion. 

Carlton Stowers is a free-lance writer who lives in Comfort, Texas.

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